



## **PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET**

**Boston Public Health Commission  
Communicable Disease Control Division  
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# **Rabies and Bats**

### **What is rabies?**

Rabies is a viral disease that affects the brain and spinal cord (central nervous system). The virus is found in the saliva of an animal with rabies and is usually transmitted by a bite or scratch. Though recovery from illness once symptoms appear is very rare, a series of shots after exposure to the saliva of a rabid animal will prevent rabies.

### **What do I need to know about bats and rabies?**

In recent years, most rabies cases in humans in the U.S. have been due to bat bites that were not recognized. Bats make tiny teeth marks that are hard to see so the bite may not be noticed.

A healthy bat will rarely come in contact with people. However, a rabid bat may be found on the ground and is rarely aggressive. If there is any chance that someone had contact with a bat, the bat should be captured and tested for rabies. Contact includes finding a bat in the room of an unattended child or other person who may not be able to report whether they had contact with the bat, or waking up to find a bat in the same room. Bats flying overhead, and bats that have not had contact with humans or animals, do not pose a risk for transmitting rabies.

### **Catching bats for rabies testing:**

Rabies can only be confirmed through laboratory testing of the bat. Testing is important because it can help determine whether rabies treatment is necessary to prevent rabies. If there has been human or pet exposure and you know where the bat is located, Boston Animal Control (617) 635-5348 can assist with catching the bat.

Follow these steps to capture a bat:

- Find a container with a lid or use a stiff piece of cardboard as a lid. Do not use pillowcases, blankets, or towels, as bats may bite through the fabric.
- **Never handle a bat with bare hands.** Wear thick leather gloves.
- Wait until the bat has landed. Approach the bat slowly and place the container over the bat. Then slide the cover underneath and flip the container over, trapping the bat inside.
- Secure the lid with tape.

Submit the bat to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health State Laboratory Institute for rabies testing. The phone number is (617) 983-6385.

### **What should you do if someone is bitten by a bat or another animal?**

Bats and other wildlife such as skunks, raccoon, foxes, and coyotes can carry rabies. If they are not properly vaccinated, domestic animals such as cats, dogs, ferrets, horses, cattle, goats, and

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llamas can also get rabies, usually from the bite of a wild animal. Steps to take if bitten by a bat or wild animal:

- Wash the bite immediately with soap and water. Thorough cleaning is the most effective way to prevent infections after animal bites.
- Visit your health care provider so they can assess the need for rabies prevention. Other infections, such as tetanus, may also result from a bite wound and require medical attention.
- Wild animals that bite people should be humanely killed and tested for rabies if they can be captured. If in Boston, contact Boston Animal Control (617) 635-5348 for assistance in capturing the animal for testing.
- If you were bitten by someone's pet, get the pet owner's name, address, and telephone number, and a clear description of the biting animal. Contact Boston Animal Control at (617) 635-5348 or for assistance.
- In most cases, a dog, cat, or ferret that bites a person is confined and observed for 10 days. If it becomes ill during the 10 days, a veterinarian should be consulted immediately.

### **What should I do if my pet is exposed to a bat?**

If you think your pet or domestic animal has been bitten by a bat, contact a veterinarian for assistance immediately. If the bat is available, it may need to be bat tested for rabies. Remember to keep vaccinations current for cats, dogs, and other animals.

### **Can rabies be prevented?**

- Be sure to vaccinate your pets (dogs, cats, ferrets) against rabies and keep the vaccinations up to date. Vaccinated pets prevent the spread of disease between wildlife and people.
- Vaccination is also available for horses, cattle and sheep.
- Teach children not to approach an unfamiliar or wild animal and encourage them to tell an adult if they are bitten.
- Never leave infants or young children alone with any animal.
- Report stray dogs and cats or animals showing unusual behavior to Boston Animal Control at (617) 635-5348.
- Don't attract wild animals to your home or yard. Tightly cover garbage cans and bat-proof your home.
- Don't feed, approach, touch or adopt wild animals. Don't keep wild animals as pets.
- Hunters and trappers should avoid animals with abnormal behavior or animals found dead. Wear gloves while processing game, and cook all meat thoroughly.
- Fair and petting zoo animals that come into contact with the public should be vaccinated.
- When traveling, especially outside the U.S., avoid contact with dogs and cats even if they appear friendly.

### **What is Rabies Post Exposure Treatment, or PEP?**

Post-exposure prophylaxis is a series of shots in the arm and around the area of the bite that is given to prevent rabies in someone who has been exposed to a rabid animal. If a person is bitten by a bat and the bat is not available for testing, public health officials and healthcare providers may recommend that the person receive PEP to prevent rabies. Often rabies treatment can be avoided if the bat can be tested for rabies.

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**How can I "bat-proof" my house?**

Some bats live in buildings and there may be no reason to get rid of them if there is little chance for contact with people. However, bats should always be prevented from entering rooms of your home. For assistance with "bat-proofing" your home, contact a wildlife conservation agency or pest control agency.

If you choose to "bat-proof" your home yourself, follow these suggestions:

- Carefully examine your home for holes that might allow bats entry to the home.
- Any openings larger than ¼ inch by ½ inch should be caulked.
- Use window screens, chimney caps, and draft guards beneath doors to attics.
- Fill electrical and plumbing holes with stainless steel wool or caulking.
- Ensure that all doors to the outside close tightly.
- Observe where the bats exit at dusk and keep them out by loosely hanging clear plastic sheeting or bird netting over these areas (bats can leave, but cannot reenter).
- After bats have been excluded, the openings can be permanently sealed.
- Most bats leave to hibernate in fall or winter, so this is the best time to "bat-proof."

**For more information, please contact  
Boston Public Health Commission  
Communicable Disease Control  
(617) 534-5611 or [www.bphc.org](http://www.bphc.org)**